DISASTER PEAK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 32,040

The Disaster Peak Wilderness Study Area (WSA OR-3-153/NV-020-859), located in both Nevada and Oregon, is southern-most in a group of five WSAs known collectively as the Trout Creek Combination. The WSA lies in the west-central Trout Creek Mountains at the headwaters of Kings River and McDermitt Creek. It contains a portion of the main north-south ridgeline of the Trout Creek Mountains, a number of stream valleys and rolling sagebrush hills. It has a very irregular horseshoe shape, and is approximately 10 miles long and 8 miles wide. The WSA contains land in BLM's Winnemucca, Nevada district, and Vale and Burns, Oregon, districts. Total public land in the WSA is 32,040 acres; 18,840 acres in Oregon and 13,200 acres(1,097 acres of which are recommended for nonwilderness) in Nevada. The private parcel and the split estate lands are also in Oregon. The boundary follows BLM roads and private land boundaries.

The geologic landmark known as Disaster Peak is a large, symmetrical butte that is visible throughout the region. The western-most portion of the WSA is known as The Granites, named after the abundance of Cretaceous granitic outcrops that appear at the base of the predominantly volcanic ridgeline. The Trout Creek Mountains are an uplifted and tilted geologic block with a steep escarpment along the southern and eastern extent of the range. Within the portion of the WSAs south of the range lies a collapsed volcanic dome called the McDermitt Caldera. The Trout Creek range tilts to the north and precipitation drains into the playa of the Coyote Lake Basin. The Disaster Peak WSA sits along the northwest rim of the McDermitt Caldera, forming part of the divide that separates the Coyote Lake Basin in Oregon from the Humboldt Basin in Nevada.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 31,170 acres as wilderness and release 2,400 acres for uses other than wilderness. Receiving wilderness designation would be 28,290 acres of public land; 1,280 acres of private land; the mineral estate of 1,450 acres of split estate land which would be required through purchase or exchange, and an additional 150 acres of non-WSA public land adjacent to the Disaster Peak WSA. Twenty-four hundred (2,400) acres in the eastern and southern portions of the WSA would be released for uses other than wilderness; 2,200 acres of public land and 200 acres of split estate land in Oregon. The dirt boundary road between Disaster Peak and Willow Creek WSA in Oregon would be closed, combining these two areas. Several dead-end dirt roads extending in from the boundary road would also be closed.

In the area recommended for wilderness, the recommendation acknowledges high wilderness values which outweigh projected mineral development which would be foregone. In the portion recommended for uses other than wilderness, the recommendation would allow for projected mineral development.

A total of 2,400 acres of public land would be recommended for uses other than wilderness to allow for exploration for geothermal and mineral resources, which would cause short-term impacts to wilderness values, and to allow for development of an open-pit gold mine in an Area of Critical Mineral Potential including a milling/leaching complex in the east-central portion which would impair wilderness values on 800 acres over the long term. On a long-term basis, the gold mine would impair naturalness on approximately 3,000 acres, impair solitude for visitors in adjacent areas and primitive recreation opportunities in the vicinity of the mine. In addition, a way of approximately 1 mile in length would remain open in the area not recommended for wilderness.

Also included in the nonwilderness area is an extension of the WSA that has limited wilderness values and would be difficult to manage as wilderness. A small extension from the main part of the WSA results in a poor configuration and limits opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

Frequent contact between visitors is likely to occur in this southern-most extension. Management for wilderness would be difficult given topography, vegetative cover and configuration.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Disaster Peak WSA exhibits a generally natural character. There is great topographic and ecological diversity which ranges from high mountain elevations to valleys, all within a semiarid sagebrush steppe environmental zone. The WSA's diverse terrain ranges from broad, flat to gently rolling ridges at lower elevations to deep, wide, steep-walled canyons. The canyon slopes are composed of broken rock rims, outcrops and scree slopes. Topography screens interior developments throughout the WSA because nearly all of the developments are in draws or basins. Thirty-one unnatural features that affect the study area's naturalness include six fences, 16 ways totaling 18 miles, seven livestock water projects, one snow measurement station near Peak Canyon, and one cabin located in the northeast corner of the WSA. Twenty-six percent of the WSA is visually influenced by these unnatural features.

B. Solitude: There are outstanding opportunities for solitude; the WSA's size and configuration provide excellent opportunities for dispersed use. Visitors tend to use natural travel corridors along the bottoms of major vegetation provide excellent screening in these high use areas. The short tributary drainages into the main canyons provide visitors with ample opportunities to find seclusion. The WSA has many miles of canyons and tributaries. In addition to these canyons and tributaries are extensive stands of vegetation that may be nearly impenetrable except where numerous game and cattle trails allow access to enclosed clearings and springs.

The study area has two boundary roads totaling 7 miles, eight dead-end roads totaling approximately 10 miles and 16 ways totaling 18 miles. Intrusions from vehicle travel on boundary roads and dead-end access roads, and ranching activities to the southeast are generally brief and distant and their influence does not penetrate far into the WSA. The roads are used for hauling salt, supervising cattle, checking projects, and as access by recreationists.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: With the exception of the narrow configuration of the southern-most boundary extension of the WSA, the study area provides outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Water and campsites are abundant. Available recreation opportunities include day hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting , fishing, sightseeing, photography and winter sports (cross-country skiing and snow shoeing). The major canyons provide many hiking and backpacking routes which vary in distance and difficulty.

D. Special Features: Outstanding scenery is available in the WSA because of the geologic landmark of Disaster Peak and dramatic topography that is expressed in prominent cliffs, spires and massive rock outcrops. The area around Disaster Peak and in The Granites portion in Nevada exhibits volcanic and granitic formations that have eroded into extensive badlands. Due to the wide variety of environmental conditions that result from the range in elevations (roughly 6,500 to 8,000 feet), vegetative communities are diverse and range from sagebrush/grass communities to extensive stands of mountain mahogany at higher elevations. Sage grouse, a Federal candidate for listing in Oregon under the Endangered Species Act, inhabits the WSA. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has managed the study area as a trophy mule deer management area by limiting hunting. Limited stands of alder and willow also supply key cover and forage in canyon environments.

Native populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout are present in the Sage Creek and Line Canyon drainages of the WSA. This species is Federally listed as threatened in Nevada and is native to the Lahontan Basin, which is part of the Humboldt Basin. The Nevada goal for the Lahontan cutthroat is to maintain its genetic

purity, and eventually remove it from the Federal list by expanding populations and improving habitat. This population is among the few remaining physiological adaptations of this species and is valuable for fish biologists seeking to reintroduce trout into harsh desert stream environments. Lahontan redside shiners also are found in these steams, which represent the northern-most extent of their range.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The area recommended for wilderness is manageable as wilderness. The WSA possesses a high degree of naturalness and is large enough to provide a core area to ensure the availability of wilderness values.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The entire WSA is considered to have moderate potential for the occurrence of oil and gas. However, there has been no deep drilling, and as of October 16, 1987 there were no oil and gas or mineral leases in the WSA.

Portions of the WSA are considered to have a moderate potential for the occurrence of uranium/thorium. The eastern portion of the WSA is considered to have a high potential for the occurrence of gold. Approximately 2,400 acres in the eastern portion of the WSA is an Area of Critical Mining Potential (ACMP).

Portions of the WSA are considered to have a moderate potential for the occurrence of lithium bentonite and zeolite. There is moderate potential for beryllium and mercury, in portions of the study area. As of October 16, 1987, there were 35 mining claims located in the eastern and southern portions of the WSA for a total of 705 acres. However, no economically minable locatable energy (i.e., uranium/thorium) and/or mineral resources have been discovered on the claims. There is no present production of any mineral or geothermal resources in the Disaster Peak WSA. In summary, quantities of various minerals are unknown, but potential for occurrence is moderate to high in several parts of the WSA.

The WSA has no potential for sand and gravel or geothermal energy resources. Two different organizations inventoried for oil and gas potential, one said that there was moderate potential and the other said that there was no potential.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS and the supplement to the draft EIS, a total of 14 comments specifically addressing the Disaster Peak WSA were received. Of those, nine comments supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Five comments supported no wilderness for the WSA.

Comments against wilderness cited that the land is rich in minerals, objected to private property being acquired, and that road closures could put restrictions on grazing use and decrease the value of ranch operations. Those against the recommendation said that wilderness designation would cause conflicts with the interests of private landowners in regard to cattle grazing operations, that the recommendation does not include adequate watershed protection, and that emphasis was given to unproven mineral potentials and the split-estate if that is necessary to protect wilderness character. Those in favor of all wilderness supported closing all roads and acquiring private land, and said that wilderness values of the area outweigh its mineral potential. Also cited were high wilderness values of the WSA, including the threatened trout species, ecology and recreation opportunities, solitude, and wide diversity of plant and aquatic communities.

No WSA-specific comments were received from any federal, state or local agencies. The State of Nevada has indicated to the Nevada BLM State Office that it objects to the closing of any road.

There were two comment letters received on the final EIS specific to this WSA. They supported the all wilderness alternative.